

TAP DANCING LESSONS

back in second grade
my mother had a brainstorm.
she would sturdy up my spindly legs,
with dancing lessons at marge miller's studio.

i had my choice of tap or ballet
and instinctively i chose tap,
not so much because i had anything against homosexuality
as that i sensed the rise of ed sullivan, and the
whole third world.

i quit tap dancing two years later
so as not to miss the notre dame broadcasts,
just as many years later i was to be spared a life of
shame
when i quit the boy scouts to watch i love lucy.

the funny thing is, my mother's crazy idea worked.
it worked so well that for twenty years i moved around
with the shape of a wigwam, a sort of winnebago teepee --
picture if you can a six-foot dwarf.

only years of lifting weights and drinking beer
have given me any semblance of an upper body,
and even that, like a glacier succumbing to the centuries,
is sloping badly towards the equatorial belt.

still, i was better at it than you might imagine.
mrs. miller once informed my mother that i was
her "little fred astaire." and even now, at parties,
i am apt to break into my "shuffle-off-to-buffalo."

i have two other steps in my repertoire:
the "bell step," although i barely leave the floor now,
and the old standby "stamp-shuffle-vault-change."
the "cossack squat" is just a memory.

thus do the best laid plans
of mommies and of mummers go awry.
if i had opted for ballet,
my mother might today be proud of me.

RON FOOTE'S MEMORIAL SERVICE

ron, i really meant to attend the memorial service
they held for you on campus the other day
but i was well into the third day of an inevitable five
under the volcano, and my car was illegally parked,

and then the campus wives began to arrive,
and i couldn't find a spot to move my car to,

so finally i just said shit
and drove to the 49er tavern.

i sat down next to lou boyles
and bought a round and asked if he remembered you
and he said of course and that he had read about your death
and i declared your unofficial memorial service officially
in session.

lou told of the time he bartended a reception you were at
and how you drank your scotch neat with a cold beer back,
and a goodly battalion of those pipers indeed,
and nary the worse for wear,

and i said yes, that our paths had been known to cross
as the sun was setting behind morry's fine liquors fine
wines
and how when i first came to long beach, begging for a job,
a kid with short hair, three kids to support, and fired
after his first year someplace else,

you had made me think you were impressed by my bibliography
of three poems,
and later you helped in your perpetually invisible ways
to see that i got tenure, and at committee meetings,
you always
did your best, with wit and discreet nudges, to keep
me from falling asleep.

and i spoke of the time you came to our place at
sunset beach
and said that you had lived there as a young professor
and that they had been the happiest days of your life
and how you made my wife feel a part of everything.

and i recalled your kindness to the stetlers when they
first arrived,
putting them up until they found a house
and later saying, "look, don't feel you have to be
inviting us over
or any of that silly reciprocal nonsense."

others, overhearing us, began to stop by,
and they spoke of your season's tickets for the rams
games,
of your excellence as an instructor,
your patience as a counsellor,
your efficacy as a diplomat, always sensing the
progressive
aspect and insuring, quietly, that it prevail.
your virtues were as comprehensive as your courses:
shakespeare and the rules of grammar.

they spoke predominantly, though, of these last years
when you and everyone knew you were dying;
they marvelled at your unabated humor,
at your utter perseverance in normality.

i am afraid, ron, that we were unstinting
in our efforts at commemoration,
so much so that it is only now, a full week later,
that this pen rides steadily upon this sea of white.

in closing let me say that i hope
the creative writing scholarship being established in
will produce a student able to come up with something ^{your name}
better than
"this sea of white."

in closing let me close with an inconclusive anti-climax:
a lot of people wish that you were still around.

BLIND LEADING BLIND

i was handing back some freshman papers
that i'd had graded by a new student assistant,

and while idly perusing his scribblings
i noticed first that he had vastly overrated them
and then that he was rather a poor speller himself
and then i read, "you write real clear!"

"jesus," i thought, but the student was already upon me,
so i handed her the paper, automatically intoning the
and espied, "you got some good ideas!" ^{next name,}

heart in stomach, i handed the paper over,
called the next name, and there it was,
big as china: "... HARDLY NO MISTAKES AT ALL!"

i distributed the rest of the papers in a sort of trance,
doing my best to keep my eyes from falling upon any
inwardly praying, "please god, don't let any of these kids
bring home their papers to their parents." ^{more of the comments,}

BUKOWSKI AT HIS BEST

he was sitting in the forty-niners tavern
after delivering a relatively sober noon-time reading
and he was bending over backwards to be gracious
to the students who had gathered there, a little
fearfully, to meet him.